COLOSAL

Colossal

Director Nayibe Tavares-Abel

Dominican Republic | 2025
76 min. | Spanish, English with English subtitles

Screenplay Nathalia Lafuente, Nayibe Tavares-Abel. **Cinematography** Kat Díaz. **Editing** Nathalia Lafuente. **Music** Gus Rodriguez. **Sound Design** Miguel New. **Sound** Marie Jimenez. **Production Design** Milena Volonteri. **Animation** Milena Volonteri. **Producer** Lei González. **Executive Producers** Leidy González, Juan A. Bisonó. **Production companies** Costanera Cinema (Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic), Media Jibara (Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic). **With** Nayibe Tavares-Abel, Poi Tavares-Abel, Faisal Abel, Nayibe Abel (Mami), Froilán Tavares Cross, Nayibe Chabebe (Mamiellai).

Synopsis

Every family has its secrets, says director Nayibe Tavares-Abel. Those of her own are intimately interwoven with the history of the Dominican Republic – and with the political violence and frustration inherent within it. Tavares-Abel is an election observer for the 2020 presidential elections in the Dominican Republic. 30 years earlier, in May 1990, her grandfather Froilán Tavares, a renowned lawyer, was appointed chair of the electoral commission – in the hope of a fair democratic process and the end to dictatorship under Joaquín Balaguer. However, the election was overshadowed by suspicions of electoral fraud levelled at Tavares. Archive material shows the hopes and disappointments that accompanied the elections, while a spontaneous survey on the streets of Santo Domingo reveals fundamentally different perspectives on the re-elected long-term ruler Balaguer. **COLOSSAL** is the self-examination of a younger generation, autobiographical and sincere, a trans-generational family portrait caught between fear and trauma. A crash course in the history of the Dominican Republic and democracy as such. A filmic attempt to find peace, dare to do something new, get active. (Alena Martens, Fabian Tietke)

Nayibe Tavares-Abel, Dominican of Palestinian and Lebanese origin, is a documentary filmmaker, research consultant and prop master. She has worked on productions for Netflix, Nickelodeon, Lionsgate, and Paramount. Nayibe was the researcher and co-writer of EN MOVIMIENTO (2023), which explores the history of transportation and challenges of mobility in the Dominican Republic. CARMENCITA (2020), her hybrid short film that integrates 16mm silent film, stop-motion animation, and documentary footage, premiered at the Trinidad and Tobago Film Festival in 2020 and received an honorary mention.

Films: 2020: Carmencita (short film). 2023: En movimiento / In Movement. 2025: Colosal / Colossal.

Director's Statement

Breaking the Cycle

Representative democracy is imperfect, but vital

COLOSAL is a story about pain but also about hope. Political violence leads to intergenerational trauma. With our film, we want to show a path to break that cycle. Although representative democracy is far from perfect as a political system, for now, it is our best tool against authoritarianism and the violation of human rights. For as ancient as democracy may be, it is still a work-in-progress worldwide and we want to bring to light how important it is to preserve it.

Nayibe Tavares-Abel

Interview

"If I am going to expose them, I am going to expose myself too"

Nayibe Tavares-Abel talks to Asja Makarević and Lisabona Rahman about the history of the Dominican Republic and investigating her own family stories

Asja Makarević: Perhaps we can start with the title **COLOSSAL** *as a kick-off-question. Could you reflect a bit on the choice of title?*

Nayibe Tavares-Abel: The title comes from the main accusation that was brought forward against my grandfather's time at the electoral board in the Dominican Republic. The main opposition candidate told the press that there had been a colossal fraud. When I started my research eight years ago, I started asking questions in my family. I was shocked about the self-censorship. What is so big that nobody wants to talk about it? What happened must have been colossal for them to put so much effort towards hiding it. That is where the title comes from.

Lisabona Rahman: Do you feel that it's even more colossal that a film is coming out as the result of the whole process?

NTA: Yes. In January of 2020, I was part of the Moulin D'Andé screenwriting residency in Normandy, France. At that point, the film was very historical, mostly based on archive and found footage. I arrived back at the Dominican Republic just a few weeks before the pandemic broke out. I did not have a producer yet, although I had been writing and researching archive material for three years. My friend Katherine [Díaz, ed.], the cinematographer, and I decided to go out on election day in 2020 to get a few shots as a comparison to what we had from 1990. Out of the blue, the election was canceled. Without any planning from our part, the magnitude of the film became larger and we said to each other, this is not the past, this is still happening. So it became even more colossal.

AM: That is interesting how the present determined your dealing with the past of your country. The film was very historical in the beginning, and then it became more personal. Can you reflect a bit on this development?

NTA: There is a phrase from 1970s feminism that has always spoken to me: "The personal is political." We cannot turn our backs onto politics because it does affect our personal lives. In my case, two families from opposite ends of the political spectrum in the Dominican Republic are united. Everyone in Europe or in Latin America knows someone whose grandparents went to the war, or an uncle who was a political activist. We want to reflect on that in this film.

LR: It certainly feels like you let us into your personal space, which is politically charged. The film also addresses class differences, for instance, when you talk about protests against discrimination in education or your kitchen talk with your grandma. How do you see this special topic in your family and in your country?

NTA: Throughout the different cuts of the movie, we wanted the issue of class to appear in a subtle way. In that kitchen scene you can see that my grandmother's domestic worker is black and a Haitian immigrant. You can see it also in my conversations with my uncles, when we are talking about my grandfather's upbringing. People from the Dominican Republic know that someone who was born in the town of San Pedro, like my grandfather, usually belonged to a wealthy family. You can see that in photographs, too. The fact that I have a family archive is a sign of privilege. Not everyone knows what their ancestors looked like, since only wealthy people could afford to have their photograph taken 180 years ago. Here is another story, which maybe only Dominicans will understand. In 2020, when the first protest broke out, ten days before Covid arrived, we were all sent home. The election was cancelled that day and a very small group of people went to the electoral board to see what happened. I was there because my friend was a candidate for the city council. The next day, there were fifty people. The day after that, there were a hundred people. And that evening on a very popular radio show, the host said not to worry about the protests, those are just a bunch of rich kids that have nothing else to do. In Dominican, the word we use for that is 'popi'. For some reason that comment created a union between the social classes. The next day, people from other social classes decided to join the protest and say, "no, democracy is not just for rich kids, it is for everyone". We started with twenty people and within a week there were four thousand people. It was unprecedented in Dominican history.

AM: There is this shared solidarity across classes, but also across generations. The conversation with your grandmother was enlightening: the fact that she was ready to support your idea and your research, but also ready to join you politically outside on the streets. That is a powerful moment in the film.

NTA: Yes. In terms of generations, something very interesting has happened in the Dominican Republic. My grandparents' generation was born and raised during the dictatorship of Trujillo, they were in their 20s or 30s during the 1965 US military occupation. We experienced a civil war at that time. That generation was fighting for the constitutional government but they were defeated after the US invasion. That is when Balaguer [Joaquín Balaguer, president between 1960–1962, 1966–1978, and 1986–1996, ed.] came to power. For the next twelve years, that generation was basically exterminated. They killed many journalists, activists, members of political parties. Amin, my great uncle, was part of that group. So the next generation, my mom and dad's, became somewhat jaded and took their distance from politics. When my generation arrived, there were new issues at stake that made us become engaged, like the environment. During the 2010s, a lot of my peers were protesting against illegal mining, access to public beaches, pollution. This new generation, the grandchildren of the people that survived the dictatorship, was protesting in 2020.

LR: Open political activism is a hallmark of your generation. How do you think this is going to develop?

NTA: Well, I do not live in the Dominican Republic anymore. I have been living in Costa Rica with my husband for the last two years. But from 2021 to 2023, there was a lot of political involvement regarding reproduction and sexual rights. In the Dominican Republic, there are no abortion rights, with no exceptions, not even for rape and incest. One night, we were camping outside of Congress with a small group of women and were attacked by the police. I hope that political activism will keep moving forward, despite the threat of force that still happens in the Dominican Republic. However, the social movements are forming a new political party called "Opción Democratica", which I am a part of. This party had some successes during the last year's election and we are hoping to make more progress.

AM: Great to hear that. In your film, three points in time are repeatedly mentioned: 1990, 1961 and 2020. When did this temporal structure become obvious to you?

NTA: This goes way back, way before I started this movie. When I did my research master's in political science in Nanterre University in France, my thesis was about the student movements during the 1960s in the Dominican Republic. I discovered that my great uncle on my mom's side and my grandpa on my dad's side were political rivals at the university. I started finding these letters between them and news articles that tell the story of how Amin and his group wanted to put up this plaque saying: „He fought for the rights of the people" and my grandfather was against it. So we knew that we had to talk about the 1960s, when the fight for democracy in the Dominican Republic basically started. 1990 was important because my grandfather was part of it. That is the year, when the party that would take power after Balaguer for the next 20 years, consolidated their place in the political spectrum. I had this whole universe in my head, the producer and the editor got it, but we were struggling to put it together. That is when we brought in Milena, our production designer, to the team. Milena [Volonteri, ed.] and I came up with the idea of making the family tree. We worked on this for over a year. I showed her my diary that I kept for years. That is how we organized everything. It was important for people to be able to place the different dates, because that is how you can see the evolution.

LR: I love how tactile the film is. It involves a lot of handwork, typewriting, moments of you touching photographs with gloves with your brother. Hands and handwork are very present in the film.

NTA: I forgot to mention that Milena is actually a textile artist. We went to film school together, but she is a textile artist and works with thread. We thought of how to thread this together.

LR: This is visible and influences the way the film is structured. What made you go into that direction instead of using AI technology, for example?

NTA: After my father passed away, the law firm split up and things went to different houses. I inherited my grandfather's archive. I have always been interested in history and the physical archive meant a lot for me. You can see a scan in the film, but this piece of paper at some point was in my grandpa's hands. There are these objects and there is a magic to them. In the film industry in the Dominican Republic, I work in the prop department. I am used to seeing how objects tell stories. The physical world will disappear at some point unless we preserve it.

AM: This is reflected in the film with the photographs, when they lose their color and disappear. There is also the connection to the elusiveness of the memory of your grandfather. Because the film has a historical part, but at some points you allow yourself to leave the arena of historical events, which you contextualize for the viewers, and then we get closer to your family through emotional, poetic moments. Correspondingly, the tapestry of

different kinds of footage gives more space to the viewer, as opposed to having a linear storyline. Can you reflect on this?
NTA: The editor always said to me that for us, the people who are now engaged in politics, history is not repeating itself. History is more like a snake. It is not like a snake that bites its tail, as we are not going back to the same moment. It's more like a spiral. It feels like we are going back, but we are moving forward. We hope to leave this as a message of the film. Regarding memory and my grandfather, as we were rewriting the script, we realized that my grandfather was dealing with Alzheimer's at the end of his life. Now, there is evidence that Alzheimer's is linked to trauma. I personally believe that what my grandfather went through at the electoral board, in some way, kickstarted or intensified his disease. He passed away just five years after leaving the electoral board. That is something I always thought about when I was at those protests. People were yelling all kinds of things at the board members in 2020, and I thought, yes, they are public figures, but they also have a home and children. We want to remind people that political figures are human beings and they are not perfect. They are going to make mistakes, and if something happens to them, someone is going to miss them at home.

LR: It is impressive how you create an image of a family or, maybe it is not an exaggeration to say, a dynasty. A lot of stories about lineage often try to come up with something coherent, whereas your film exposes rupture and conflict. How did you arrive at this choice?

NTA: The fact that the two families came together has a lot to do with what I told you about my mom's generation and their desire to stay away from politics. My mom and dad got together because they went to the same university. This is a private university that was created because a group of professors, including my grandfather, at one point in 1966 said: "Okay, we cannot deal with the student protests, the violence and the police inside the campus every day. We want to teach. We are just going to create a new, private university, and we're going to leave all that behind." I think that created a big social rupture in the Dominican Republic. Before that, the public university was a place where different social classes would meet. The creation of this new private university set a precedent. From then on, the public university was for a certain social class and the private one was for another. That had an impact on Dominican society and politics. Since the 1970s, everything in my country has gone towards privatization, from water to electricity to education. In my opinion, it started at that point in history.

AM: The film and the social issues are really entangled. Your grandfather was a versatile personality, in private and in public. Dear to family members and other people, and determined, as we see through press clippings and archival footage. Nevertheless, there is a lot of uncertainty about who this person actually was. Even at the end, there is no clear set of meanings assigned to him. Was he an anti-hero, or a hero, who was not given a proper chance to become one?

NTA: I was seven when he passed away. When I was born, my parents were young, still at university. We all lived with my grandparents until I was four or five. I have many beautiful memories with my grandpa. I remember swimming with him in the pool or playing with his cats or just sitting on his lap on the rocking chair. When I started my research, something struck me at a personal level. Was this person, who I love, a corrupt person? Did he steal the election for a dictator, who also murdered someone else in my family? In terms of politics, my grandpa was conservative and as a lawyer, he defended corporate interests against the interest of the working class. I think he is a complex character and we wanted to show that in the film. Neither a villain nor a hero. Despite being right-wing, he was interested in defending democratic values. He started his research about electoral law before he was assigned to the electoral board, when he was dean of the law faculty at the private university. He was a member of an international organization in Costa Rica called "Capel" that works with electoral boards across the globe. I think my grandfather was a bit naive. He had never been part of a political party and that was his first time as a public figure. I think he did not know how dark politics can be. Sometimes there are strategies used in countries like mine to manipulate politics. I don't know if he was an anti-hero, I don't want to say he was a victim either. I think he went into the electoral board with the best intentions but he did not have the right tools. It was a complex political context. Although I would have not agreed with him politically, I know from my mom's and my uncles' testimony that he was a great dad. I remember him as a funny and caring grandpa. So, not black or white. I think most humans are like that and we wanted to show that in the film.

LR: This brings me to a point that I adored while watching the film. You are like a detective and remind me a lot of Ms. Marple. How do you feel, with a distance to the film, about your family's willingness to let you do this investigation and to make a film out of it? Have you always known that you will appear in the film?

NTA: This is a funny story. We have an advisor, Tanya Valette, who is the director of the film school that I attended. I met her through a workshop organized by the Dominican Film Commission. Before I went to film school, I had the story. I had done my research in France and wanted to tell the story as a fiction film. I did my little pitch at the workshop and the first thing Tanya asks me is why I want to make a fiction and not a documentary film. I then started doing the research and getting negatives from a lot of my family members. They kept asking why I want to go into the hardest part of my grandpa's life. There are many other things I could tell about his life. Even my other grandpa told me that I can talk about his life, but when I get to the part where he was in the electoral board, I should end the film with "to be continued", which I thought was funny. When I realized how painful this is going to be for my family members, there was a point when I decided I need to be in front of the camera, too. If I am going to expose them, I am going to expose myself, too. And I think this is only fair. I come from a social sciences background and I know how important it is to be respectful to your subject of study, because in social sciences, your subject of study is a human being. Now that the film is done and that we are going to have the world premiere, there are some family members that are not very happy, and I respect that. But we try to be as respectful as possible with the film and fair with my grandpa and how hard his task was.

AM: I think this dignified, respectful and fair approach to your family history comes across very much in your film. Thank you and I look forward to seeing you at the Berlinale.

LR: Yes, and I wanted to ask how the film is getting on, because you are still in post-production?

NTA: We sent the final DCP a week ago. I was in Chile in December finishing the color. We got a grant at this studio called Filmo Studio, which is a big thing in Chile. We were so happy to be there, they were great. I was there with my baby, I was breastfeeding while doing the color, until we finished it. The whole team were just so thrilled because it took us eight years, but we are so grateful and happy. And we believe we are going to have a great contribution to Dominican history. It is also a historical document, where we show the 1960s and 1990s and then the 2000s and 2020s, which will very soon be history, too. So we are proud, honored and excited.